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pg. E1

Cruise Ship on the Rocks, Comedy of Errors Ensues

By PAMELA REID

Cy and Julie Mizla of East Hartford are seasoned travelers. Both were looking forward to the two-week Mediterranean cruise they had booked in August for $1,930 each aboard the Navarino, the sleek white-hulled liner owned by Karageorgis Cruises in Athens, Greece. But they weren't prepared for what turned out to be a disastrous vacation — being shipwrecked for three-days with 500 frightened, angry passengers, screaming and yelling in six languages after their Greek cruise liner struck a submerged "mountain" in the Mediterranean Sea.

The commodore of the liner and his three captains were subsequently stripped of their sailing credentials and are slated for a court trial in London to face charges of gross negligence in connection with the disabling of the ship and the disastrous cruise. So, at least , according to Julie Mizla, were the passengers told later by the cruise ship company.

"You could laugh or cry. I decided to laugh,"recalled the curly blonde-haired grandmother. "Everything's a lot more fun if you keep your cool."

She also found that accepting that the cruise company was doing its best to help passengers, even when disorganization was at its zenith and rumors were rampant, was better than complaining.

"We gave them the benefit of the doubt from the beginning. There were contradictory orders all the time. They promised us all kinds of things. But we understood that was stress. It was impossible for them to do all they said they were going to," she said.

And, since the danger they wouldn't survive was never really present, being shipwrecked was an adventure in a way that their planned itinerary, with its visits to 10 Mediterranean ports and Greek Islands, could never be.

Mizla, who speaks Italian fluently, found herself pressed into service as an interpreter. And the "gang" of about a dozen Americans the couple befriended during the cruise acted as mediators between the cruise company representatives and the scores of tired, irate passengers.

A "Mr. Navarino" contest was in full swing in the ballroom, and scores of other passengers were watching a movie in one of the lounges when the ship struck an underwater mountain somewhere off the island of Patmos on the seventh day of what up to that point had been a fun though uneventful cruise.

Julie was dressing her 6'4" husband in women's clothes for fun and games during the contest. She was just installing a pair of earrings when suddenly, "It sounded like a tremendous explosion. The force knocked us clear across the room. Luckily we landed on one of the beds and were unhurt," she recalled.

Through their open stateroom door, the couple saw the frightened crew running on deck. "They told us to go upstairs, which we did. Cy was barefoot, and we forgot our life vests. Several panicky passengers, catching sight of Cy in a dress and jewelry, said in Italian "Even at a time like this Americans try to be funny.'"

See Looking Back, Page E7

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Looking Back, the Navarino Disaster Seemed a Comedy of Errors

Continued From Page E1

In the pandemonium that ensued, Cy raced back for life vests. Julie looked around and saw that the ballroom — where everyone had been partying only minutes before — was a shambles. "Tables, chairs, everything was just all smashed. Broken glass was all over," she said.

By the time her husband returned with two life vests, passengers were being assigned to lifeboats, which were ready to be lowered into the sea.

"When Cy put me in that life vest I realized the force of what was happening because he looked frightened and I've never seen him frightened before," in 36 years of marriage, she said.

For an hour, they stood by the lifeboats. Finally, orders over the loudspeaker said anyone who wanted a drink could help themselves in one of the disabled ship's lounges. The Mizlas were among the first to grab a Bloody Mary.

Another hour had passed when the loudspeaker announced that the ship's insurers, Lloyd's of London, had arrived and that divers were inspecting the damage where rocks had ripped a gash in the bow of the 631-foot ship's steel hull. By then the Navarino had sunk slightly, settled onto the underwater rocks, and was listing."From that point on," said Mizla, "All drinks were on the house."

Mizla doesn't recall any passengers going below to the staterooms that first night spent aboard the disabled ship. Everyone was too scared and stayed on deck, catnapping in lounge chairs.

The next morning, Saturday, passengers were taken in tenders on a 15-minute ride to Patmos for a barbecue, which the ship's crew had worked all night preparing, while Lloyds and the Greek Coast Guard investigted the accident.

Passengers also were told that tugboats were on their way to pull the ship free of the rocks so that the damage could be better assessed. Thus the "cruise" was officially finished.

Rather than sooth them, the sight of businessmen with briefcases and uniformed officials swarming over the stricken liner angered the still frightened passengers, primarily because no one was answering any questions about the accident. Rumors were rampant, the commodore was drunk, incompetent or worse. Petitions calling for lawsuits and refunds of cruise costs were circulating by the hundreds, Mizla said.

Dinner and the native dancers from Patmos didn't sooth them either. Instead of going to bed as the anonymous loudspeaker suggested, passengers — who by now had reached a near mutinous emotional state — began smashing ashtrays against tables and screaming for the commodore, said Mizla.

When the commodore did appear a short time later, what he said enraged the passengers even more. The man who was supposed to be in control said he had no answers for them and that he was frightened himself. "He said he was afraid we were going to kill him. He sounded like he meant it," said Mizla.

The next morning, Sunday and two days after the ship had crashed, the commodore announced that Lloyds had relieved him and his three captains of their authority. A ferry boat had been ordered to transfer the passengers from the disabled Navarino liner. By then, the Greek crew had not slept for three nights. "They were beginning to look like zombies," said Mizla.

The ferry, Mediterranean Sun, arrived Monday and the Mizlas begain living in the clothes they were wearing that day. Everything else had been packed as the passengers looked forward to finally heading home.

But the Mediterranean Sun, which had been pulled from its repair berth in drydock, had no air conditioning, few of its toilets worked, and the cruise ship passengers found themselves sharing cabins with strangers. The weather was unbearably hot as the overcrowded ferry steamed back to Piraeus, the port of Athens.

One of the worst moments occurred just when everyone, following orders, jammed the ferry "garage" unloading door. But the door was stuck and passengers spent an hour sweltering together. "If you could have heard the remarks, the four-letter words in six languages," recalled Mizla, laughing.

Cruise line representatives had booked the harried passengers in hotels, nationals of each country kept together. By 2:30 a.m., Tuesday, the Americans had been booked into the Caravelle in Athens. "The clerks were all confused. They were just not prepared. The organization of this thing was just bad," said Mizla.

Passengers were told to meet at 9:30 a.m. that Tuesday morning in the lobbies of their respective hotels with cruise line representatives. Mizla, instead, spent the morning shopping, avoiding the insults, arguments, and what had now become constant yelling and screaming.

Three or four New York lawyers were leading the lawsuit contingent, and one passenger who had brought along a typewriter was taking depositions. At 11:30 a.m. a new twist occurred: cruise line representatives were passing around papers, smiling all the while, which stated that the company would refund half of the cruise costs and book the passengers on the old Mediterranean Sun ferry back to Venice.

Those who didn't sign the paper were on their own. The cruise company would pay for nothing.

The Mizlas and their group signed gladly. "At least, we felt, that was better than Athens because there were no flights for at least a week, and rooms were difficult to get because it was the height of the tourist season. And we were told the Sun was being cleaned and the air conditioning was being repaired," Mizla said.

The Mizlas returned to the ferry several hours early and picked out a comfortable cabin. Smart thinking, they discovered later, because the toilets still didn't work. Neither did the air conditioning, and there still weren't enough cabins to go around.

The ferry was slated to leave port Thursday at 1 a.m. It was still docked two hours later, and when Cy Mizla woke his wife at 5 a.m., they discovered the vessel had stopped somewhere in the Mediterranean Sea, completely disabled.

Towed Thursday morning into the island of Corfu, the Sun was berthed and the bedraggled passengers loaded into buses for a shopping tour, only to be ordered back to the ferry to pack their luggage for a plane ride to Venice. The old Sun had been declared unfit for service.

That night, the Navarino crew served dinner aboard the ferry, and the Mizlas and their group, feeling sorry for the bleary-eyed crewmen, literally turned the tables by serving them their dinner.

"We sang songs and danced; the crew broke down and cried. They said no one had really treated them that well before," she said. Other passengers, meanwhile, had drifted into the ferry lounge and were sharing ice cubes to cool drinks in the parched weather.

At 3 a.m., passengers were awakened to be herded onto buses for the airport. When the plane landed in Venice Friday morning, four hours later, the Navarino passengers found company representatives frantically trying to find rooms for them as well as the 250 new passengers who had arrived for the second cruise. No one, it seemed, had been able to notify all those in the new group that the Navarino wasn't going anywhere.

Cy and Julie Mizla enjoy happy times before the ship went down.

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